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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [TH](#)
SUBJECT: THAKSIN FOES DRAW THOUSANDS TO ANTI-GOVERNMENT
PROTEST IN BANGKOK

REF: BANGKOK 972 (CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT BLUES)

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) The anti-government People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) mobilized a higher-than-expected 11,000 demonstrators at its first post-coup rally held on March 28 at a renowned Thai university. PAD leaders joined with prominent academics to protest the new Thai government's policies and oppose recently-announced plans to amend the constitution. There were reports that a confrontation with a smaller group of government supporters at a nearby counter-demonstration briefly turned violent; however, police successfully kept the two animated crowds apart. PAD declared the event a success and vowed to organize more protests, suggesting that the 2006 coup and the new constitution have done little to heal divisions in Thai society. End summary.

RETURN OF THE PAD

2. (U) Approximately 11,000 anti-government demonstrators led by a reinvigorated People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) held their first rally in nearly two years at Bangkok's renowned Thammasat University on the evening of March 28. PAD leaders at the largely peaceful protest railed against the policies of the People's Power Party (PPP)-led government and denounced plans to amend the constitution (reftel). Prior to the September 2006 coup, PAD organized massive anti-government rallies in Bangkok that attracted as many as 150,000 demonstrators. PAD suspended their protests following the coup, declaring success after the ouster of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

3. (U) Leading PAD members and outspoken anti-Thaksin academics railed against the PPP-led government during the rally, which lasted approximately five hours. Chief among the PAD's complaints were the transfers earlier this year of prominent bureaucrats in sensitive positions, including a prominent Justice Ministry official overseeing a criminal case against Thaksin. PAD opposed prospective amendments to the constitution, accusing the PPP of abusing its power to avoid its dissolution for alleged election fraud. PAD also blamed the PPP for selfishly plotting to use the amendment

process to grant amnesty to members of the former Thai Rak Thai executive board who are constitutionally barred from holding elected office. The organizers mocked Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej and Thaksin in an hour-long Chinese opera spoof, complete with elaborate costumes, poetry, and original music. The event's keynote speaker, PAD leader and media mogul Sondhi Limthongkul, called Samak a "dictatorial capitalist" and claimed his government was "Thaksin's regime in disguise."

SURPRISE TURNOUT

¶4. (SBU) Organizers had originally billed the event as an educational opportunity for the public to learn of the government's purported failings. PAD also hoped to lay the groundwork for future protests. PAD seemed unprepared for the higher-than-expected interest, however, and the 5,000-seat auditorium which hosted the event was completely filled one hour before the event's official start time. An estimated additional 4,000 enthusiastic protesters packed an overflow area in the auditorium's balcony, and occupied most of the remaining open space in the dangerously overcrowded room. Organizers hastily arranged to broadcast live images of the event on smaller projection screens surrounding the auditorium for an additional 2,000 people who were unable to enter the auditorium. Most protesters appeared to be middle-aged and middle-class Bangkok residents; many wore PAD-themed anti-Thaksin clothing apparently distributed at pre-coup PAD rallies.

NOT ENTIRELY PEACEFUL

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¶5. (SBU) Interior Minister Chalerm Yoombamrung had boasted in mid-March that the PPP would mobilize a counter-protest to oppose the PAD rally. The counter-rally was abruptly canceled on March 26, ostensibly to forestall a violent confrontation between the PAD and anti-PAD groups. Nevertheless, at least 300 boisterous anti-PAD demonstrators had gathered in a field several meters from the University campus by the afternoon in an allegedly impromptu counter-rally. These demonstrators verbally attacked PAD leaders and Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda, whom they accused of masterminding the coup which ousted Thaksin. Some of these protesters identified themselves to Embassy observers as Bangkok taxi drivers and provincial farmers from Thailand's Northeast, but did not specify who had organized their rally.

¶6. (SBU) At approximately 7:00 p.m., there were reports that some anti-PAD protesters threw bottles and other objects at nearby PAD demonstrators and threatened to enter the Thammasat campus. Security officials reacted swiftly, closing the university gates and rerouting pedestrian traffic half a kilometer away from the protest site. PAD demonstrators inside the campus and the nearby anti-PAD group exchanged heated words well into the night, and the atmosphere remained tense until the protesters began to disperse on their own accord. One media outlet reported that at around midnight Friday, unknown individuals threw stones, water bottles, and urine-filled containers at a bus filled with PAD protesters affiliated with a Buddhist sect whose leader, Chamlong Srimuang, is a core PAD member. Eight people were reportedly injured, and one person was reportedly taken to a hospital for treatment.

COMMON THEMES

¶7. (SBU) Despite the combative atmosphere, the two groups voiced surprisingly similar messages. There was no love lost for the new constitution by either the PAD or anti-PAD groups. However, while the PAD criticized the constitution

for not having gone far enough to prevent the return of Thaksin, anti-PAD demonstrators claimed the charter's provisions were specifically targeted against the PPP. Both groups also denounced the 2006 coup leaders -- the PAD felt they had not prosecuted Thaksin sufficiently, while the anti-PAD group felt they had gone too far.

JUST THE FIRST ACT

18. (U) In interviews with the press, PAD organizers hailed their return to the streets as a resounding success. PAD spokesperson Suriyasai Katasila claimed the large turnout indicated widespread support for PAD's anti-government message, and called on citizens to protest the government's plans to amend the constitution. PAD announced it would hold another rally in late April, and called for additional support from the public.

COMMENT

19. (SBU) Although the majority of the Thai electorate is arguably tired of confrontation, the strong turnout at the PAD rally indicates that the 2006 coup and the 2007 elections have done little to resolve divisions in Thai society. The first pre-coup PAD protests initially drew much smaller crowds than the March 28 rally; however, they grew rapidly in size following the disclosure of allegations that Thaksin abused power for his own financial gain. Barring a similar galvanizing event, it is unclear whether PAD leaders can mobilize protests on as massive a scale this time around, but their early success in attracting disaffected citizens indicates the government cannot ignore them entirely.

JOHN